

SCIENCE BRIEFS

Starving sea lions fill beaches in Peru

SAN JUAN NATURE RESERVE, Peru (AP) — A sickly smell of death hangs over Peru's southern beaches, where thousands of starving sea lions have washed ashore to die. El Niño has driven away the fish they eat.

Of the 180,000 sea lions that lived on Peru's Pacific coast before El Niño arrived late last year, only 30,000 remain, said Patricia Majluf, a biologist with the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society.

But biologists have found 3,000 dead sea lions just in the San Juan reserve, where 9,000 to 15,000 sea lions usually live.

Scientists find clues to language origins

BEIJING (AP) — Archaeologists have found 3,500-year-old sheep bones carved with Chinese characters, a discovery that offers a glimpse at the primitive origins of the world's oldest written language.

Characters found on the bones include an upside-down "V" that experts deciphered as the Chinese word for "six" and a symbol that means "divination," the state-run Xinhua News Agency said Sunday.

Six other characters carved roughly but deeply onto the two fragments of shoulder blade have not been deciphered, it said.

Researchers look for ways for fighting deadly viruses

Drugs used as treatment neglect central nervous system

By JILL REED
Science writer

Texas A&M University is working with scientists across the United States to find vaccines for deadly viral infections like HIV.

Dr. Diane E. Griffin, a Johns Hopkins University neuroscientist, spoke to Texas A&M professors and students earlier this month about how viruses affect nerve cells in the central nervous system.

Dr. Jane Welsh, a neuroscientist in A&M's Department of Veterinary Pathobiology and Griffin's colleague, said brain and spinal cord cells cannot be replaced so it is important to learn how to fight diseases that attack the central nervous system.

Welsh said viruses like HIV usually attack and then live within the central nervous system, which the immune system cannot protect.

If immune cells attack and kill invading viruses and bacteria, they also kill the body cells in which they reside.

"Nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord usually do not divide after early development, so if they are killed, they are permanently lost," Welsh said, "where cells of the liver and other organs can regenerate."

Too much nerve cell death can cause paralysis or dementia, Welsh said.

"If we can understand how viruses cause disease, we can understand how to assist in developing treatments for infections of the central nervous system," Welsh said.

Griffin said since the body cannot effectively fight viruses in the central nervous system, the outcome of a viral infection depends on the virulence of the infecting virus and the nerve cell's ability to resist infection.

Specializing in microbiology and immunology, Griffin uses a mosquito-borne virus that causes acute encephalitis in horses as a model system to study the way nerve cells eliminate viruses and respond to viruses in the central nervous system.

Griffin has found that the age of the infected cell determines how well a virus will affect it.

A young cell will die immediately, Griffin said, while a mature cell will only have a persistent infection.

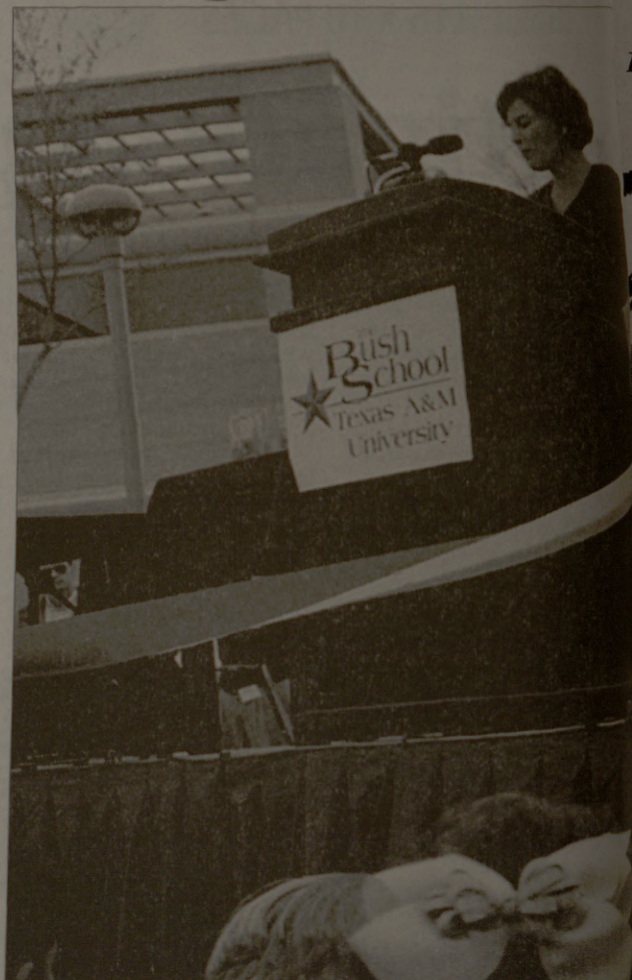
"If a nerve cell has started producing vital immunity factors and has made connections with other cells, it will be more likely to manage the infection and stay alive," Griffin said.

To date, scientists have found no treatment to rid the body of viral infections like encephalitis, influenza, HIV, herpes, genital warts and some forms of cancer.

Welsh said drugs that interfere with HIV replication have proven effective, but many drugs are excluded from the central nervous system because of a blood-brain barrier which prevents immune cells and toxins from entering nerve cells.

Griffin plans to research the nervous system disease in AIDS by studying the clinical features of HIV-infected patients, cerebrospinal fluid and leukocytes and tissues taken at autopsy.

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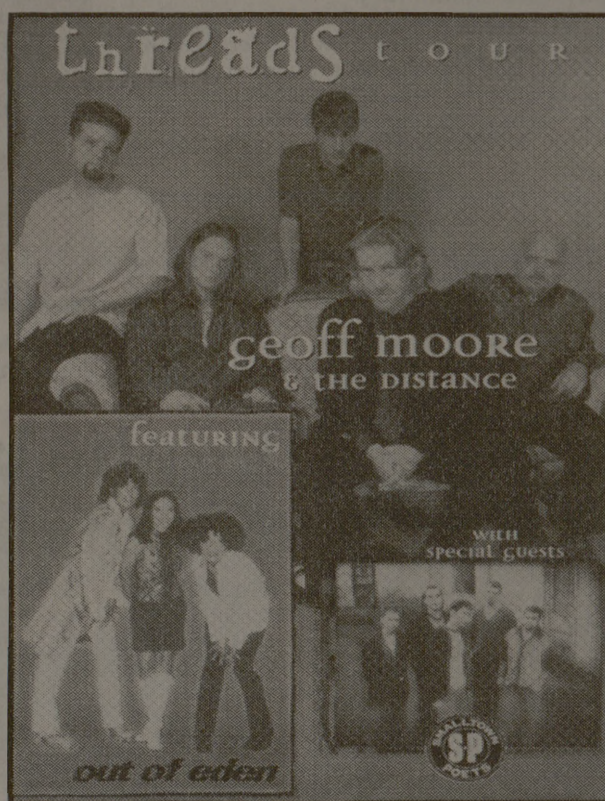
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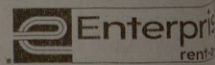
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